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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the 102 entries, dated from 1975 to 1986, in the section on Religion of "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?: An Annotated GSA Bibliography of Aging and the Humanities" reveals three principal characteristics. First, with the exception of some literature on spiritual well-being, the material cannot be dated or sequenced on the basis of content, indicating that approaches to religion and aging are diffuse. The analysis reveals that only 3% of the authors had published three or more pieces and there was neither a group of authors in dialogue nor a coherent body of literature usually associated with an identifiable professional field. Second, spiritual well-being began as a concept rooted in dependence on God and relationship to a community of faith, became secularized, and emerged as a highly individual understanding of aging. This suggests that the term became both weaker and more individual over the 11-year span from 1975 to 1986. This shift is blamed on: the attempt by the 1981 White House Conference on Aging to broaden the base of support; a shift in the political scene; the use of the term in a more individual way causing it to become part of the prevailing cultural ethos; and the economic changes since the time the term was coined. Third, with few exceptions, meaning and value are spoken of in personal or individual ways rather than in dialogue with and grounded in collective systems, reinforcing the identification of meaning as an individual reality. Religious meaning, however, is socially constructed and must be socially supported. (NB)

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RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION ABOUT AGING AND OLD AGE.
SYNOPSIS: 15 minute presentation at GSA

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?:

An Annotated GSA Bibliography of Aging and the Humanities¹ lists 102 entries, dated from 1975 to 1986, in the section on Religion. I have examined the majority of these books and articles to find themes and commonalities which, according to the writers, identify the intersection and interaction of religion and aging in the area of the humanities. What precise themes, concerns, motifs characterize writing about religion and aging from a humanities perspective in the period examined?

Three principal characteristics emerge: 1) with the exception of some literature on "spiritual well-being," the material cannot be dated or sequenced on the basis of content; 2) "spiritual well-being" begins as a concept rooted in dependence on God and relationship to a community of faith, becomes secularized, and emerges as a highly individual understanding of aging; 3) with few exceptions, meaning and value are spoken of in personal or individual ways rather than in dialogue with and grounded in collective systems.

1. Dating on the basis of content

Of the 102 items cited in the bibliography, 17 are books (of which 3 are themselves annotated bibliographies) and 7 are unpublished dissertations. The remaining 78 include 15 chapters

¹ Donna Polisar, Larry Wygant, Thomas Cole, Cielo Perdomo. Washington, DC: The Gerontological Society of America, 1988. Henceforth GSA Bibliography.

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in books and 63 articles in 37 journals. Of these, 12 appear in Generations, 10 in the Journal of Religion and Aging, and the remaining 41 appear in 35 journals. Aging is, of course, a highly complex reality, subject to analysis from a variety of disciplines. This being the case, and with such diversity of journals, it is probably of little surprise that the journal literature showed lack of common focus, demonstrated a good measure of what might be described as specific applications of common concepts, and showed a certain amount of "starting over." The vast majority of articles were one-time initiatives. Simply, in the journal literature, there has been little scholarly dialogue about themes of common interest, and thus little progress in thought or approach. The record for books is only marginally better.

With the exception of some literature on "spiritual well-being," the material does not lend itself to dating or sequencing on internal evidence. This indicates, broadly, that approaches to religion and aging, like the places in which articles appear and the topics which books address, are diffuse. Less than 3% of authors have published three or more pieces; there is no group of authors in dialogue nor is there the coherent body of literature ususally associated with an identifiable professional field.

2. "Spiritual well-being"

A certain part of the literature on religion and aging uses the term "spiritual well-being." In 1975 this term, which was used by the Section on Spiritual Well-Being of the 1971 White

House Conference on Aging², was taken up and defined, with commentary, by the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging. The definition of "spiritual well-being of the elderly" is: "The affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness."³ It is important to note that NICA's commentary on this definition explicitly affirmed that "spiritual" connotes a dependence on God, rooted in participation in a community of faith. NICA explicitly repudiated a view of spiritual well-being as equated solely with physical, psychological, or social good health, or as based on mere optimism.⁴

In an 1977 Conference on Spiritual Well-being (reported in a book of essays in 1980), the range of topics and approaches was wide, complex, rich, and often religiously or denominationally distinctive. Although not all authors shared the same perspective, they shared a vitality and enthusiasm for restoring or enhancing the spiritual dimensions of later life.

In 1981, with the approach of the White House Conference on Aging, a clear shift becomes evident. The Executive Summary of the "Report of the Technical Committee on Creating an Age-

² David O. Moberg, Spiritual Well-Being: Background and Issues. Washington, DC: White House Conference on Aging, February, 1971, U.S. Government Printing Office. The term was first articulated and discussed on December 15, 1969, according to Thomas C. Cook, Jr. (#749, p. xiv).

³ Thomas C. Cook, Jr., "Preface." James A. Thorson and Thomas C. Cook, eds., Spiritual Well-Being of the Elderly. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1980, p. xiii.

⁴ Ibidem, pp. xiii-xiv.

Integrated Society--Implications for Spiritual Well-Being"⁵ shifts from earlier definitions and commentaries; NICA's affirmation of dependence on God and rootedness in a community of faith is absent from the document, which is couched in terms designed to include the secular.

Spiritual Well-being pertains to inner resources, especially a person's ultimate concern, the basic value around which all other values are focused, the central philosophy of life--whether religious, anti-religious, or non-religious...⁶

Later in the document when spiritual well-being is addressed again, we note a clear openness to the secular: "The spiritual is not, however, exclusively religious, but pertains to intangible, non-material, supernatural characteristics, qualities, or needs, which all human being possess." (p. 3)

From the time of the 1981 WHCoA there is a different feel to the way the term spiritual well-being is used in the literature cited in the GSA Bibliography: there is less freshness, less naive enthusiasm, less denominational rooting, and less sustained attention to the spiritual. Later writings also make the term highly individual. For example, Barden (#659, 1986) gives a distinctive twist to the notion of spiritual well-being.

For the church as a part of Judeo-Christian spirituality, perhaps the best guide for assessing spiritual well-being is shalom. Personal and social wholeness means peace in its deepest and richest sense: the fullness of life which is

⁵ Thomas C. Cook et al. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

⁶ Thomas C. Cook et al. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 1.

the state of living in harmony with all humanity, having financial prosperity, good health, peace of mind, and the free growth of the inner soul. (p. 145)

This curious mixture of characteristics (all of which are undeniably attractive) places spiritual well-being within what Thomas Cole calls the "enlightened" view of aging. A "society committed to the limitless accumulation of individual health and wealth" has split apart negative and positive aspects of growing old.⁷

Discussion

It is clear that the term both became weaker and more individual over the span of 11 years. Why did this happen? Given the political climate of the 1981 WHCoA the taskforce tried to broaden the base of support. The outcome was to lessen the ownership of the term by religious groups. Secondly, the political scene shifted. From the White House Conference on Aging in 1971 to the WHCoA in 1981 there is a growing reluctance to fund federally the care of the vulnerable (of any age.) Churches are called on for a new level of volunteerism, and this shifts the agenda of religion and aging. Thirdly, the term began to be used in a more individual way and thus became more part of the prevailing cultural ethos. Fourthly, the term was coined at a time when there was enthusiasm on the part of some very capable folks for a new ministry with older adults. In the political and economic climate of the 1980's, as public monies and church

⁷ "The 'Enlightened' View of Aging." In What Does It Mean To Grow Old, Thomas Cole and Sally Gadow, eds., Durham, NC: 1986, p. 121.

support (financial and programatic) dried up, that enthusiasm was sorely tested.

3. Meaning as an exclusively personal system

There is one specific area in which a sustained commonality of approach does appear. An analysis of the literature of the GSA Bibliography indicates that with few exceptions, meaning and value are spoken of in personal or individual ways rather than as reflections of collective systems. Based on an analysis of some 50 articles, randomly chosen, it is clear that the general understanding of the great majority of these authors concurs with the general understanding of our time, namely that the connection between meaning for an individual life and any wider sense of meaning is arbitrary. Thus the literature examined reinforces the identification of meaning as an individual reality, that is the psychological meaning of my life, narrowly understood.

Discussion

What might be described as the "humanities function" of religion shows adherents how "to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope and reason."^a Making sense of basic human questions, unless a person is particularly unreflective, has special poignancy and urgency in old age (which Erikson describes as the age of ego-integrity vs despair.) However, in Western culture in

^a The Humanities in America, Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 1. Cited in GSA Bibliography p. ix.

general, and in the literature of the GSA Bibliography, these basic human questions have been reduced to individual, private questions. "This retreat to privatism is an unsatisfactory solution to questions about the meaning of life and the meaning of old age."⁹ However individually appropriated, meaning arises within a social matrix. Any serious inquiry into personal values leads to an inquiry into collective and social values. Core value systems within which personal answers are shaped and appropriated are collective enterprises.¹⁰

It is evident from the nature of religion that religious meaning is not only socially constructed, but must be socially supported. What socially supported religion accomplishes is to put proximate things in ultimate contexts and so alter them profoundly.

It is this placing of proximate acts in ultimate contexts that makes religion, frequently at least, socially so powerful. It alters, often radically, the whole landscape presented to common sense, alters it in such a way that the moods and motivations induced by religious practice seem themselves supremely practical, the only sensible ones to adopt given the way things 'really' are.¹¹

To the extent that meaning is a religious construct, that is to the extent that an individual uses the symbols, stories, and rituals of organized religion to make sense of the probable

⁹ Harry R. Moody, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁰ Cf. Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

¹¹ Glifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System." In Michael Banton, ed., Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, Edinburgh: Tavistock Publications, 1966, p. 38.

losses of age, to find possible gain and inner growth, to make peace with approaching death and the cessation of personal consciousness--in a word to the extent that personal meaning is rooted in common faith--socially constructed religious meaning must be socially supported. The "internal appropriation of a world must take place [and be sustained] in a collectivity."¹²

As was noted earlier, the literature examined reinforces the identification of meaning as an individual reality, that is the psychological meaning of my life, narrowly understood. In the light of the preceding discussion it seems clear that this orientation is harmful. More positively, the themes of dialogue between the individual and a community of meaning should be pursued vigorously, in theoretical inquiry and in the practice of religious instruction.

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¹² Berger, op.cit., p. 16.